

Understanding BICS and CALP

Variability Summary A

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There are two major aspects of language proficiency that must be acquired by second language learners. Jim Cummins has identified these as Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS), or conversational proficiency, and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP), or academic proficiency. The chart below outlines the differences between BICS and CALP.

Characteristics of BICS: Conversational Proficiency

- The basic language system used in face-to-face communication in informal contexts (intimate or colloquial registers)
- Largely acquired in the native language by children in all societies by the age of five
- Does not include literacy
- Includes the vocabulary of conversations
- Proficiency only weakly correlated with academic success

Characteristics of CALP: Academic Proficiency

- Includes formal and academic registers of the language

- Acquired mostly after the age of five, and acquisition continues throughout life
- Includes high levels of literacy
- Includes tens of thousands of specialized words relating to academic and formal register
- Proficiency strongly correlated with academic success

The differences between these two kinds of language proficiency are evident in a comparison of a 6-year-old and a 12-year-old native English speaker. Large differences are found in their ability to read and write English and in the depth and breadth of their vocabulary knowledge (their academic proficiency), but little difference in their conversational proficiency. Second language learners can reach peer-appropriate conversational proficiency within two years, but it takes a minimum of five to seven years for them to acquire academic proficiency in English. This distinction is important in terms of providing sufficient support for second language learners.

Source:

Cummins, J. (2000). *Language, power, and pedagogy: Bilingual children in the crossfire*. Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.

Adapted with permission from:

Teemant, A. & Pinnegar, S. (2007). *Understanding Language Acquisition Instructional Guide*. Brigham Young University-Public School Partnership.



Principles of Language Acquisition

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